Sabda, Human Dignity, and Telos: Reframing Moral Foundations Beyond Pure Logic

Ade Zaenal Mutaqin
Faculty of Economics and Business, Pakuan University, Bogor, Indonesia
Corresponding author: suratkiade@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0001-4114-3679

Abstract

Contemporary debates in law, bioethics, public policy, and artificial intelligence rely heavily on the language of human dignity and human telos to condemn torture, degrading treatment, systemic humiliation, and the instrumental use of persons, yet the dominant foundations mobilised to justify these claims remain largely naturalistic and procedural, grounding normativity in human capacities, evolutionary histories, or contractarian constructions under the assumed sovereignty of pure logic. This article argues that this constellation is structurally unstable. First, it reconstructs capacity based, evolutionary, and contractarian accounts in their strongest forms and subjects them to a set of minimal human dignity axioms in hard cases such as infants, persons with severe cognitive impairments, economically burdensome dependents, structurally silenced populations, and future generations, showing that these frameworks either dilute the content of dignity or covertly import thicker premises they cannot generate from within their own architectures. Second, it develops a transcendental diagnosis by arguing that strong dignity discourse implicitly presupposes a vertically anchored, norm giving, and telos disclosing source that precedes capacities, evolution, and contracts, which the article names as Sabda, understood as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, and embeds within The Cohesive Tetrad, an epistemic ethical architecture that integrates Sabda with Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention-Trace Alignment. Third, it advances a metalogical critique of pure logic, showing that logic cannot ground its own axioms, cannot generate the epistemic "ought" that makes validity binding, and is blind to telos and content, so that even the authority of logic ultimately depends on a horizon of norm and purpose better captured by Sabda. Taken together, these moves support the central claim that if we take our strongest uses of dignity and telos seriously, moral foundations must be reframed beyond pure logic by acknowledging the epistemic priority of Sabda and integrating it into a disciplined architecture of truth governance for law, public policy, and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *telos; Sabda; pure logic; truth governance; naturalism; contractarianism; The Cohesive Tetrad; artificial intelligence; public reason.*

1. Introduction

It is difficult today to write about law, bioethics, public policy, or artificial intelligence without almost immediately encountering the language of human dignity. Constitutional courts appeal to dignity when they prohibit torture and degrading treatment. International bodies invoke it when they condemn systemic humiliation, indefinite detention, and racialised violence. Designers and regulators of AI systems now speak, sometimes rather quickly, about human centric or dignity preserving technologies in guidelines and strategic documents. In all these settings, dignity is expected to do something very specific: it names a status that cannot be traded away and marks a line that even powerful institutions are not permitted to cross.

At the same time, the background picture that guides much contemporary theory is remarkably modest. Moral and legal claims are expected to be grounded within a naturalistic and procedural frame. In practice, this usually means three things. First, we look for foundations in human capacities such as rational agency, autonomy, or a list of central capabilities (Kant, 1996 [1785]; Nussbaum, 2011). Second, we tell evolutionary stories about how certain norms and practices emerged because they stabilised cooperation and improved group fitness (Darwin, 1871; Ruse and Wilson, 1986). Third, we rely on contractarian and contractualist models in which free and equal persons, or their idealised representatives, choose principles under fair conditions that encode mutual justification (Rawls, 1971; Scanlon, 1998). Running quietly in the background is an even deeper confidence: that pure logic, understood as a formal enterprise that need not answer to any higher authority, can arbitrate between competing claims and keep our normative ambitions under control.

This combination of strong front stage language and modest backstage commitments creates a tension that can be felt but is rarely named. When we say that every human being has an inherent worth that does not depend on performance or social recognition, that this worth is equal across persons, and that some modes of treatment are simply ruled out even if they would benefit many others, we seem to be saying something highly demanding. When we then try to ground these claims in capacities, evolution, contracts, and pure logic, the ground begins to move under our feet. The more seriously we take our strongest uses of dignity, the less plausible it becomes that these foundations are sufficient on their own.

The intuition behind this article can be put bluntly. If we really mean what we say when we invoke human dignity and human telos in their strongest sense, then our usual foundations do not suffice. Capacity based accounts tend to exclude precisely those who most need protection, or else they quietly smuggle in a thicker view of human nature and purpose than they officially admit. Evolutionary narratives can explain why dignity norms appear and stabilise, but they cannot transform facts about adaptive success into unconditional claims about what must never be done. Contractarian constructions do a better job of expressing equality and public justification, but they ultimately presuppose, rather than generate, the judgment of who must count as a bearer of claims. Pure logic, finally, although indispensable, turns out to be unable to justify its own normative authority or to decide which ends its inferential power should serve.

The project of this article is to make that tension precise and then to turn it into a positive proposal. I begin by reconstructing three families of contemporary foundations for dignity and telos-capacity based, evolutionary, and contractarian-as charitably as possible, not as straw men. I then introduce a set of minimal human dignity axioms that capture the least we seem to be committed to when we talk about dignity in law, bioethics, and public policy. These axioms

are used as stress tests in hard cases: infants and those who will never develop central capacities, persons with severe cognitive impairment, economically burdensome dependents, structurally silenced groups, and future generations. The first result is negative but important: the three families of accounts cannot, by their own lights, satisfy these axioms without either weakening the content of dignity or borrowing from a thicker normative source that they do not acknowledge.

The argument then takes a further step. Instead of treating pure logic as a neutral and self sufficient arbiter standing above moral disagreement, I examine its self limitation. I argue that logic cannot justify its own axioms without circularity, cannot generate the basic epistemic "ought" that makes logical consequence binding rather than merely interesting, and is blind to the telos and moral quality of the contents it connects. Logic remains indispensable, but its authority is derivative. It depends on a prior horizon of norm and purpose that it does not create. This is particularly evident once we consider how logical and data driven systems, including contemporary AI, can be deployed to produce formally impeccable yet substantively unjust decisions if left without an external standard of what humans are and what they are for.

Once that horizon is brought into view, a different picture emerges. I argue that our strongest commitments about human dignity and human telos implicitly presuppose something like a Word that speaks with authority about what humans are and what they are for. I name this source Sabda, understood in a disciplined way as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, and I embed it in The Cohesive Tetrad, an epistemic ethical architecture that integrates Sabda with Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention-Trace Alignment. Within this architecture, claims made in the name of Sabda are not insulated from critique; they are tested conceptually, experientially, spiritually, practically, and historically.

The wager of the article is that this move does not weaken rationality, but instead takes seriously what our dignity discourse already assumes and what pure logic cannot secure by itself.

1.1 Thesis and contribution

The demands of a Q1 level article are high. It is not enough to restate known positions or to offer a slightly improved synthesis. The work must bring something genuinely new, and must do so with methodological rigor and argumentative clarity. In that spirit, the central thesis and contributions of this article can be stated succinctly.

Central thesis.

If we take our strongest contemporary claims about human dignity and human telos at face value, including their application to the most vulnerable and the not yet born, then neither capacity based, evolutionary, nor contractarian foundations, even when backed by pure logic, can carry the full normative weight they are asked to bear. The coherence of such claims requires a vertically anchored, norm giving, and telos disclosing source that precedes human capacities, histories, and agreements. I name this source Sabda, understood as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, and I argue that Sabda must stand in epistemic priority even to pure logic, which cannot ground its own normativity.

Original contributions.

1. **A unified diagnostic of failure across three major families of foundations.**

   Rather than criticising capacity, evolutionary, and contractarian accounts separately, the article shows that they share a common structural problem when tested against minimal dignity axioms in hard cases. This yields a single, coherent diagnosis of why naturalistic and procedural foundations are weaker than their advocates often assume.

2. **A sharpened set of minimal human dignity axioms as a methodological tool.**

   The article formulates axioms for inherent worth, basic equality, non instrumentalisation, integrity across vulnerability, and accountable self correction not as a new theory of the person, but as an explicit reconstruction of what current legal, bioethical, and policy practice already presuppose when they invoke human dignity. These axioms function as a portable stress test that can be used beyond the present argument.

3. **A metalogical critique of pure logic's claim to ultimate authority.**

   The article advances a focused analysis of the limits of pure logic, showing that it cannot justify its own axioms, cannot generate the fundamental epistemic "ought" to care about truth and coherence, and cannot determine the telos or moral valence of the inferences it permits. This metalogical critique is integrated directly into the dignity debate, rather than treated as a separate technical issue.

4. **The introduction of Sabda as a structurally specified source of norm and telos.**

   Sabda is not presented as a vague religious appeal, but as the kind of Word that is logically required if our strongest dignity commitments are to be coherent: universal in address, non contingent in its judgments, orientation giving with respect to human telos, and capable of judging even stable and popular orders.

5. **The development of The Cohesive Tetrad as an architecture of truth governance.**

   By embedding Sabda in a sixfold architecture that includes Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention-Trace Alignment, the article offers a concrete model of how a norm and telos giving Word can be engaged and held to account in law, public policy, and AI governance. This goes beyond the usual dichotomy between secular proceduralism and unexamined religious appeals by placing all claims, including claims about Sabda, under multi register scrutiny.

Taken together, these contributions aim not only to add one more voice to the dignity literature, but to shift the terms of debate. The core claim is that as long as we speak seriously about human dignity and human telos, we cannot avoid the question of Sabda. We can either continue to borrow silently from a Word we refuse to name, or we can bring that Sabda into the open and subject our appeals to it to disciplined scrutiny within an architecture of truth governance suited to contemporary law, public policy, and artificial intelligence.

2. Contemporary foundations of human dignity and telos

Contemporary discourse on human dignity and human telos does not arise in a conceptual vacuum. It stands on top of several powerful traditions that try to answer a basic question: why, if at all, do human beings have a special status, and what are they for. In what follows, I concentrate on three families of answers that dominate current debates in moral and legal philosophy: capacity based accounts, evolutionary narratives, and contractarian constructions. They are not the only families available, but they are sufficiently influential and structurally representative to serve as test cases for the broader naturalistic and procedural project.

Rather than treating them as easy opponents, I reconstruct each in a form that is recognisable to its strongest defenders. The point is not to score quick victories, but to see what happens when these accounts are asked to carry the full weight of contemporary dignity talk, especially in hard cases.

2.1 Capacity based accounts: dignity as grounded in what humans can do or be

Capacity based accounts begin from a simple intuition. There is something distinctive about what human beings can do or be, and this distinctiveness grounds a special status. Dignity is not a mysterious substance; it is the moral shadow of a set of capacities. Two versions are especially prominent in the literature.

2.1.1 Rational agency and autonomy

In the first, more Kantian line, dignity is tied to rational agency and autonomy. Human beings are not mere loci of impulses and responses. They can form maxims, grasp reasons, deliberate about principles, adopt laws for themselves, and hold one another accountable under those laws (Kant, 1996 [1785]). To have dignity is to belong to the class of beings capable of taking a practical standpoint on their own lives as authors of law rather than mere subjects of inclination. Contemporary work on practical identity and the authority of reasons develops this line by arguing that our capacity to bind ourselves by reflective endorsement is the source of a special kind of worth that cannot be traded off against other goods (Korsgaard, 1996).

The core structure is familiar:

- (P1) Beings capable of rational, self legislating agency have a special worth that is not comparable to price.
- (P2) Human beings, as a species, possess this capacity for rational, self legislating agency.
- (C) Therefore, human beings have a special worth, dignity, that grounds stringent duties of respect.

On this view, telos is read off from capacity. The proper end of a rational being is to live in accordance with self given law and mutual recognition as ends in themselves (Kant, 1996 [1785]). Dignity names the status that corresponds to this end.

This picture has several strengths. It explains why dignity cannot be cashed out in market terms, why violations feel like more than bad policy, and why respect for persons occupies a central

place in deontological ethics. It also offers a neat bridge between the metaphysics of agency and the language of rights in contemporary legal and political theory.

2.1.2 The capabilities approach and human flourishing

A second stream, informed by the capabilities approach, shifts focus from a single core power to a plural set of central capabilities. Here, dignity does not hang on one capacity such as rational agency, but on a structured list of functionings that make a human life go well: bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation, control over one's environment, and so on (Nussbaum, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011). Dignity is violated when persons are deprived of substantive opportunities to exercise these capabilities.

The basic pattern looks like this:

- (P1) There is a plurality of functionings that are constitutive of a life worthy of human beings.
- (P2) These functionings can be captured, at a more abstract level, as central capabilities, that is, real opportunities to be and to do certain things.
- (P3) Political and legal institutions have an obligation to secure at least a threshold level of these capabilities for each person.
- (C) Therefore, respect for human dignity requires that no one be pushed below a threshold of central capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000).

In this family, telos is understood as a space of flourishing rather than a single metaphysical purpose. Dignity marks the claim each person has to inhabit that space above a certain minimum level. Violations of dignity show up, very concretely, as capability deprivation that institutions have a duty to redress (Nussbaum, 2011).

The virtues of this approach are clear. It makes dignity actionable, ties it to institutional duties, and avoids reducing everything to one master capacity such as rationality. It is also more hospitable to cultural pluralism, since different societies can specify and enrich the list while still affirming a shared core.

2.1.3 Interim assessment

Across these variations, capacity based accounts share a crucial axiom:

(CA) Dignity supervenes on the possession of, or membership in, a kind essentially defined by certain capacities or capabilities (Kant, 1996 [1785]; Nussbaum, 2011).

In other words, human beings have dignity because they actually have, or are the sort of beings that have, the relevant powers or opportunities. The explanatory direction runs from capacities, through dignity, to duties. The whole story is meant to remain within the horizon of what can be described and justified in naturalistic or at least intra worldly terms, even when it draws on sophisticated accounts of normativity and practical identity (Korsgaard, 1996).

This axiom will matter later. It is precisely what creates trouble once we move into hard cases and ask whether human dignity can be both inherent and equal across all humans, including those whose capacities are minimal, undeveloped, or permanently absent.

2.2 Evolutionary narratives: dignity and telos as adaptive artefacts

A second family approaches dignity and telos through evolutionary narratives. The core idea is that our moral norms, including the sense that some beings have special status, did not drop from the sky. They are the outcome of long, complex processes of selection in which certain psychological dispositions and social practices proved adaptive (Darwin, 1871; Ruse and Wilson, 1986).

In schematic form, the story can be told like this:

- (P1) Human beings are outcomes of long term evolutionary processes shaped by selection pressures.
- (P2) Cognitive, emotional, and social traits that enhance survival and reproduction tend to be selected for.
- (P3) Norms that treat certain individuals as protected, or as having special standing, can stabilise cooperation and reduce destructive conflict.
- (C1) Therefore, norms of respect, personhood, and even dignity can be understood as evolved artefacts (Ruse and Wilson, 1986).
- (C2) To the extent that these norms still contribute to flourishing and stability, we have reasons, derivative but real, to endorse and refine them.

In this family, telos is interpreted functionally. Hearts are for pumping blood; bees are for pollination in a thin sense; humans are for the clusters of activity and relation that helped them survive and reproduce in ancestral environments (Darwin, 1871). Dignity becomes a high level cognitive device that keeps certain members of the group beyond arbitrary harm and thus supports long term cooperation and trust.

This has obvious attractions. It promises unity between biology and ethics, it deflates metaphysical pathos around dignity, and it suggests a way to criticise and update moral norms in light of empirical findings about human psychology and social evolution. Recent work uses evolutionary considerations to challenge robust moral realism and to question whether strong moral claims can be vindicated given their genealogies (Street, 2006). The question for our purposes, however, is not whether evolutionary narratives can explain how dignity talk arises, but whether they can justify the strong claims we actually make when we appeal to it.

2.3 Contractarian constructions: dignity and telos from fair agreement

A third family roots dignity and telos in fair agreement among free and equal persons. On this view, what ultimately matters is not an underlying metaphysical status or an evolved function, but whether the principles that structure our common life can be justified in terms that no one could reasonably reject. Contractarian and contractualist theories make this idea explicit by constructing models of fair choice or mutual justification (Rawls, 1971; Rawls, 1993; Scanlon, 1998).

The basic scheme is as follows:

- (P1) Norms and institutions are legitimate when they can be justified to each person on the basis of reasons that no one could reasonably reject (Scanlon, 1998).

- (P2) A fair contractual situation models such justification by equalising power and information, for example through a veil of ignorance, ideal discourse, or similar devices (Rawls, 1971; Habermas, 1996).
- (P3) Under such conditions, agents would choose principles that treat each as a free and equal person, protect basic liberties, and secure fair opportunities (Rawls, 1971; Rawls, 1993).
- (C) Therefore, human beings have dignity as free and equal persons who must be treated in accordance with principles that would be chosen in fair agreement and withstand public justification.

Here, telos is not given at the outset as a substantive metaphysical doctrine. It emerges from the structure of fair justification itself. A life that is fitting for a person is one that can be lived under institutions that all could endorse as free and equal, at least in idealised conditions of discourse (Habermas, 1996). Dignity is the name for the status of being owed such justifiability and for the standing each person has as a source of claims in the justificatory process.

This picture is powerful in pluralistic societies. It promises to protect each person without appealing to any particular theology or comprehensive metaphysics, and it integrates dignity with public reason, deliberation, and democratic legitimacy (Rawls, 1993; Habermas, 1996).

2.4 Shared ambitions and structural vulnerabilities

Despite their differences, the three families just surveyed share three ambitions. First, they seek a secular, intra worldly grounding for human dignity and telos, one that does not rely on an authoritative Word that speaks from beyond nature and history. Second, they aim to preserve the strongest elements of contemporary dignity discourse: inherent worth claims, basic equality, and stringent constraints on degrading treatment (Rawls, 1971; Nussbaum, 2011). Third, they aspire to be architecturally self sufficient. Capacities, evolutionary processes, or contracts should be enough to do the grounding work. Logic, assumed to be pure and neutral, then adjudicates whether arguments within these frames are valid.

For the purposes of this article, their shared aspiration can be captured in a conditional:

(N) If dignity and telos can be grounded in capacities, evolution, or contracts alone, then we can retain our strongest moral and legal claims about human dignity without appealing to any authoritative source beyond human reason and nature.

The next step is to test this conditional against what current dignity practice actually presupposes. The remainder of the argument begins by asking whether (N) can survive direct contact with the axioms that already guide our use of dignity language.

3. Minimal human dignity axioms and hard cases

If dignity talk were modest, naturalistic and procedural foundations might be enough. But dignity is not modest. When courts, international instruments, and political movements invoke human dignity, they are typically trying to say something very strong: that certain lives are never expendable, that certain treatments are absolutely ruled out, and that some inequalities cannot be normalised even if they are efficient or popular (United Nations, 1948; Waldron, 2012; Rosen, 2012). To test whether capacity, evolution, and contract can support claims of

this strength, we need to bring into the open what dignity discourse already presupposes, even when it does not say so explicitly.

3.1 Minimal human dignity axioms

The following axioms are not intended as a new theory of the person. They are a reconstruction of the least we seem to be committed to when we use dignity language in law, bioethics, and public policy, as reflected in constitutional texts, human rights charters, and bioethical guidelines (United Nations, 1948; Andorno, 2009). They function as a kind of normative backbone behind the rhetoric.

- **(A1) Inherent worth.**

  Each human being possesses a worth as human that is not a function of current performance, economic value, social recognition, or instrumental usefulness. Losing a job, a role, or a set of abilities does not mean losing worth. This is the intuition behind invocations of dignity as something that persons have prior to and independently of their social status (Rosen, 2012).

- **(A2) Basic equality.**

  There is a basic equality of this worth across all human beings that cannot be overridden by differences in talent, achievement, social role, or moral record. However unequal we may be in other dimensions, we do not form a hierarchy of more and less dignified humans. This is the thought that all humans possess dignity, rather than some having a superior rank that licenses domination (Waldron, 2012).

- **(A3) Non reduction and non instrumentalisation.**

  Human beings must not be reduced to, or treated merely as, instruments, datapoints, or carriers of functions, even when such reduction would increase aggregate goods, stabilise institutions, or serve majorities. This is the core of familiar prohibitions on torture, degrading treatment, and commodification of persons in both human rights law and bioethical codes (United Nations, 1948; Andorno, 2009).

- **(A4) Integrity across time and vulnerability.**

  The worth attached to a human being extends across the entire arc of life and embraces conditions of radical vulnerability: gestation, infancy, severe disability, cognitive decline, and terminal illness. Being fragile, dependent, or costly does not lower one's claim to dignified treatment. This axiom is especially salient in debates on disability, care, and the moral status of those who are profoundly dependent on others (Kittay, 1999).

- **(A5) Coherence, self correction, and accountability.**

  Any institutional order that claims to respect dignity must:

  1. be able to state what that commitment means in publicly accessible language,

2. possess mechanisms to identify and correct violations over time, and
3. expose itself to accountability by those affected and by critical observers, according to its own avowed standards.
   This is implicit in the way courts speak of dignity as a constitutional principle that can be invoked by claimants and as a standard by which policies and technologies are reviewed.

These axioms are not utopian additions to existing practice. They are distilled from the way dignity language is already used when courts strike down degrading penalties, when bioethicists insist on non instrumentalisation in research, and when social movements appeal to an unrecognised worth that law and policy ought to protect (Waldron, 2012; Rosen, 2012). For the rest of the argument, they will serve as a minimal standard: any proposed foundation for dignity that cannot satisfy A1 to A5, especially in hard cases, is not strong enough to underwrite the way we actually use dignity language.

3.2 Hard cases as methodological probes

Abstract argument can hide a great deal of strain. To bring the tensions into clearer focus, it is helpful to look at situations where theory and moral intuition are under pressure. Five kinds of case are especially revealing in contemporary debates on dignity, care, and vulnerability (Kittay, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000):

1. **Infants and those who will never develop central capacities.**

   Newborns, anencephalic infants, and individuals who, due to congenital conditions, will never attain rational agency or autonomous choice.

2. **Severe cognitive impairment and advanced dementia.**

   Persons whose capacities have radically diminished, sometimes to the point where reciprocal communication is impossible, but whose claim to care and protection is intuitively experienced as undiminished by many caregivers and communities (Kittay, 1999).

3. **Economically burdensome lives.**

   Individuals who, in strictly economic terms, consume far more resources than they can ever produce: some chronically ill, severely disabled, or elderly persons, especially in under resourced health systems.

4. **Structurally silenced and institutionally invisible groups.**

   Populations whose voices are effectively excluded from decision making: undocumented migrants, internally displaced communities, and stigmatised minorities under authoritarian or majoritarian regimes.

5. **Future generations.**

Those who will one day exist, and whose lives will be shaped by present choices, but who cannot contract, vote, litigate, or signal preferences now.

In ordinary moral and legal practice, we are reluctant to say that these lives count for less. We tend to affirm that:

- they possess full dignity in the sense of A1 and A2,
- they may not be treated as expendable or purely instrumental, in line with A3,
- their vulnerability or absence does not diminish their claim, as A4 insists, and
- our institutions ought to find ways of representing and protecting their interests, in the spirit of A5.

Hard cases, then, are not marginal anomalies. They are methodological probes. They show whether our foundations can sustain our most serious commitments, or whether those commitments are silently abandoned when the cost is high. Work on dependency and care ethics has long insisted that any adequate account of dignity must pass through these zones of extreme vulnerability rather than assuming idealised, independent agents as the paradigm (Kittay, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Accounts that take dependency seriously argue that our moral and political concepts should start from the fact that human beings are dependent rational animals whose lives are structured by asymmetrical caring relations, rather than from an abstract image of the isolated chooser (MacIntyre, 1999; Tronto, 1993). Disability scholarship has likewise challenged frameworks that treat those with significant impairments as marginal test cases instead of central figures for theorising equality and rights (Shakespeare, 2006). If capacity based, evolutionary, or contractarian foundations cannot handle these cases without downgrading the status of the most vulnerable, then they are not strong enough to underwrite the way we actually use dignity language.

3.3 Capacity based accounts under the axioms

On a strict reading, capacity based accounts say that dignity is tied to actual possession of certain capacities or capabilities. Under such a reading, the following pattern quickly appears when we confront the five hard cases:

- Infants, those in permanent coma, and some severely impaired persons do not possess the relevant capacities in any developed form.
- Future generations do not yet possess any capacities at all.
- Certain structurally silenced groups have capacities but lack fair conditions to exercise or express them.

The logical tension can be expressed simply:

- (P1) Dignity supervenes on actual possession of capacity C.
- (P2) Some humans lack C or never will develop C.
- (C) Some humans lack dignity, or possess a lower degree of it.

This conclusion conflicts head on with A1, A2, and A4. It creates two classes of humans at precisely the points where dignity discourse insists that classifying persons by worth is illegitimate. It also sits uneasily with the intuition, central to care ethics, that profound

dependency does not weaken but rather highlights the claims of the dependent on the moral community (Kittay, 1999).

To avoid these exclusionary implications, capacity theorists often appeal to potentiality or kind membership. They say, in effect, that even if individual X does not now manifest capacity C, X belongs to a kind whose normal members do, and it is this kind membership, not current performance, that carries dignity (Kant, 1996 [1785]; Nussbaum, 2011). But this move quietly changes the story. Dignity is no longer grounded directly in the individual's present capacities. It now rests on what this kind of being is for by nature. That is, it leans on a teleological understanding of human beings: there is a way a human life is meant to go, and this meant to status does first order normative work.

At this point, capacity based accounts approach the very terrain they usually want to avoid. They begin to depend on a vertically anchored view of human nature and purpose that is not supplied by a purely naturalistic description of capacities. In other words, they start to speak, without explicitly saying so, as if some word about what humans are and what they are for is already in place and binding.

On A5, capacity based accounts perform unevenly. They can inspire institutions that track and support the development of key capacities and capabilities, and they give content to social and economic rights understood as capability thresholds (Nussbaum, 2000). But if dignity is conceptually tied to capacity, institutions may be tempted, under pressure, to treat those whose capacities are minimal or costly as candidates for lesser protection. When that happens, A3 and A4 are betrayed in practice even if they remain affirmed in official rhetoric.

3.4 Evolutionary narratives under the axioms

Evolutionary narratives have a different shape. They do not typically exclude anyone from moral consideration as a matter of conceptual design. Their difficulty lies in reconciling contingent functional explanations with unconditional normative claims.

From an evolutionary perspective, it can be entirely intelligible that a community under severe resource pressure would adopt norms that deprioritise or sacrifice members who are very costly to maintain and unlikely to contribute to survival. That does not mean such norms are inevitable or morally acceptable. It simply means that, in evolutionary terms, there is nothing incoherent about them. Studies in evolutionary ethics explicitly explore how dispositions to fairness, reciprocity, or limited altruism could have emerged under selection pressures without assuming any independent moral truth (Ruse and Wilson, 1986; Street, 2006).

When we say, however, that it is wrong in principle to abandon severely disabled infants, to treat undocumented migrants as disposable, or to ignore the interests of distant future generations for the sake of present advantage, we are not claiming that such practices are maladaptive or destabilising. We are saying that they violate an inviolable status, even if they might in some scenarios increase fitness or stability.

Put schematically:

- Evolutionary explanation yields claims of the form:
  (E) In environment E, strategy S tends to outperform strategy S' in terms of fitness or stability.
- Dignity axioms require claims of the form:
  (D) For any environment E, if strategy S violates inherent worth and basic equality, then S is impermissible, even if S outperforms S'.

There is a clear gap between (E) and (D). No amount of evolutionary elaboration, as such, will produce (D) without importing a normative premise about what may not be done to persons regardless of adaptive payoff. Hard cases make this gap vivid. It can be locally advantageous, in a thin evolutionary sense, for a group under stress to discard burdensome members. To say that such a strategy is morally ruled out is to step outside the evolutionary register and into a different normative horizon.

On A5, evolutionary frameworks can model feedback and norm revision: groups learn from the long term consequences of their practices and adjust norms accordingly. The metric for better, however, remains functional: greater stability, cohesion, or reproductive success. There is no built in place for a word that can say that an entire pattern is fundamentally wrong because of what these persons are, even if it is locally adaptive. To reach that judgment is already to move beyond a purely evolutionary story.

3.5 Contractarian constructions under the axioms

Contractarian constructions are, at first sight, more promising. They are designed to express equality and to guard against domination by insisting that principles must be justifiable to each person as free and equal (Rawls, 1971; Scanlon, 1998). Yet when we bring hard cases and axioms A1 to A5 into view, a familiar pattern reappears.

Contractual dignity typically attaches to persons as parties to fair agreement or as those to whom justifying reasons must be addressed. Infants, persons with profound cognitive impairment, and future generations are not parties in any literal sense. Their inclusion depends on additional moves: allowing representatives, building their protection into what reasonable contractors would choose behind a veil of ignorance, or appealing to separate moral intuitions about who must be counted (Rawls, 1971; Habermas, 1996).

In each case, the contract presupposes, rather than generates, a prior judgment that these beings are owed justification as a matter of principle. That judgment is functionally equivalent to A1 and A2. It says that certain humans cannot be excluded from moral standing even if they cannot meet the formal criteria of partyhood. This is not a weakness of contractarianism as such; it is a sign that its deepest commitments lean on a thicker background about who humans are and what may not be done to them.

A second difficulty concerns A3. Suppose there exists a stable equilibrium in which all actual contractors are willing to accept principles that allow harsh treatment of certain marginalised groups, as long as their own interests are secured. From a purely procedural standpoint, such an equilibrium might be perfectly coherent. To rule it out as unjust, the theory must appeal to a substantive constraint: certain ways of treating humans are beyond the pale whatever contractors might be willing to accept, even under idealised conditions (Scanlon, 1998;

Habermas, 1996). That constraint looks very much like a vertical standard, not a mere product of contract.

Finally, on A5, contractarian theories offer rich resources for publicity, justification, and revisability. Where they struggle is with those who cannot yet or no longer can be parties and with future generations who cannot raise claims now. Duties to such parties inevitably reach beyond the logic of mutual justifiability among existing agents and point again toward a prior word or horizon within which some beings must be regarded as claim holders irrespective of their contractual status.

3.6 Interim conclusion

The picture that emerges is strikingly uniform. Capacity based accounts either exclude hard cases or transform themselves into teleological theories. Evolutionary narratives can explain how dignity norms arise and stabilise, but cannot, by themselves, support their unconditional force. Contractarian constructions articulate equality and justification, but quietly rely on prior judgments about who counts and what may not be done to them.

The conclusion is not that these approaches are useless. They capture important truths about the importance of human powers, the history of moral norms, and the centrality of justification in modern law and politics. But as foundations for the strongest dignity claims we make, they are incomplete. They live, often unknowingly, off a thicker normative horizon that they do not articulate.

The picture that emerges is not one of minor, local difficulties. It is the outline of a shared dependence on a thicker normative horizon that none of these accounts is willing to name. The pressing question, therefore, is what sort of source must already be presupposed for axioms A1 to A5 to make sense at all, and how that source can be brought into view without abandoning logical rigor. In what follows I call this source Sabda and begin to sketch the architecture within which it can be engaged.

4. Hidden dependence on a thicker normative source

The three families of accounts we have just surveyed do not fail everywhere. They capture genuine insights. Capacity based theories remind us that powers of understanding, choice, and relational life do matter. Evolutionary accounts explain why certain moral sensibilities appear and stabilise. Contractarian approaches discipline our intuitions by asking what can be justified to each person. The problem is not that these frameworks are wrong in everything they say. The problem is that they are silently leaning on something they officially refuse to name.

Rather than treating this as an embarrassment to be covered over with technical refinements, we can take it as a clue. The repeated need to borrow from a thicker normative horizon suggests that there is an underlying architectural gap, a missing layer in the picture of how dignity and telos are grounded. The question is not whether capacity, evolution, and contract can be patched up, but what sort of source they already presuppose when they try to do justice to our strongest dignity commitments.

4.1 From scattered repairs to a unified diagnosis

We can see the pattern more clearly by lining up the typical repair moves side by side.

Capacity based accounts, when pressed on infants and those who will never develop central capacities, shift from actual performance to potentiality or kind membership. They say, in effect, that this is the kind of being that is ordered toward rational life, even if it will never realise it. That is a teleological claim. It treats human beings as having an intrinsic orientation, a for the sake of which, that is not simply a summary of current functions.

Evolutionary narratives, when confronted with practices that are adaptive but morally abhorrent, do not stop at description. They say that even if such a practice might have been locally advantageous, it would still be wrong. That still does not come from evolutionary fitness. It comes from a judgment that there is a way of treating persons that is simply not permitted, whatever the adaptive calculus says.

Contractarian constructions, when faced with the possibility that a stable and consensual order might degrade some members, respond by insisting that some beings must be treated as bearers of claims even if they cannot participate in the contract on equal terms. Again, this must is not produced by the contract itself. It expresses a prior conviction about who counts and what may not be done to them.

Across these cases, the underlying movement is similar. Each theory moves from its official grounding story, capacities, evolution, or contracts, to something else:

- a view of what human beings are and what they are for,
- a sense that some practices are wrong in themselves,
- a conviction that some beings cannot be excluded from moral standing.

These something elses are rarely developed. They appear as passing gestures, as if they were small auxiliary premises. Yet their logical role is far from small. They are doing the work that allows the theory to pretend that it can sustain axioms A1 to A5 on naturalistic and procedural grounds alone.

4.2 Making the implicit premise explicit

We can now state the situation more directly. When contemporary theories insist on inherent worth, basic equality, non instrumentalisation, integrity across vulnerability, and accountable self correction, they are implicitly committed to at least three claims.

First, **given worth**. Human beings have a worth that is given rather than constructed. It is not manufactured by capacities, contracts, or evolutionary history, even if these shape how the worth is recognised and protected.

Second, **non negotiable constraints**. There are ways of treating humans that are ruled out in principle, even when they are functional, stable, or preferred by majorities. In other words, there is a standard of right and wrong that is not reducible to equilibria of interest or fitness.

Third, **priority over recognition**. Recognition, agreement, and institutional status do not create dignity. They answer to it. A legal order can therefore be judged as unjust, not just as unstable, when it systematically misrecognises human worth.

Taken together, these claims describe a source of norm and telos with three features. It has priority over human capacities, histories, and agreements. It has authority to bind agents and institutions even against their interests. It is articulable, in the sense that it can be spoken, interpreted, and appealed to in critique.

Call this the missing tier, the tier above capacities, evolution, and contracts that makes our strongest dignity talk intelligible. So long as it remains implicit, naturalistic and procedural theories will oscillate between under ambitious conclusions and over ambitious rhetoric. They will either scale down dignity to fit their resources, or they will make claims they cannot defend without smuggling in precisely the kind of normative source they wish to exclude.

4.3 Beyond shared values and thin humanity

At this point, it might be tempting to say that the missing tier consists of nothing more than shared values or a thin idea of humanity. That response, however, underestimates the strength of axioms A1 to A4. Shared values explain convergence in practice; they do not by themselves justify claims that some practices are wrong even if everyone endorses them. A thin idea of humanity tends to collapse back into capacities, species membership, or social recognition, and we have already seen how fragile those are in hard cases.

The kind of source that can bear the weight of A1 to A4 must have a stronger profile. It must speak about all humans as such, not just members of particular groups. It must apply with non contingent force, so that its verdicts do not merely track local advantage. It must carry orientation, in the sense that it does not just say that humans matter, but also what they are for. It must be capable of judging even long standing, widely accepted orders.

Historically, when movements against slavery, colonialism, or systemic racism have appealed to dignity, they have spoken as if there were a word about human beings that existing orders had betrayed. They have not merely said that we now prefer different norms. They have said that what has been done was always wrong, even when law and custom said otherwise. That is the tone of a norm and telos giving word, not of a shifting consensus.

4.4 Naming the source: Sabda

The argument so far has been structural. It has not yet committed us to any particular religious tradition or doctrine. It has only brought into view the contours of a source that contemporary dignity talk already presupposes.

At this point, a name can be proposed for this source:

Sabda, understood as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos.

Sabda here does not mean a single sentence or a single text. It designates a mode of address, a speaking that does not simply describe how things are, but declares how they ought to be and what they are for. Sabda is revelatory in the sense that it discloses what is not available from

capacities, evolutionary histories, or contracts alone, namely that humans have a given worth, that some treatments are absolutely ruled out, and that there is a purpose to human life that is not exhausted by functional roles.

Crucially, Sabda is not introduced as an arbitrary dogmatic insertion into an otherwise neutral space. It is the explicit naming of a premise that capacity, evolutionary, and contractarian theories already rely on in fragmentary and unexamined ways. Once it is named, however, a further task emerges. Claims made in the name of Sabda can themselves be distorted, instrumentalised, or co opted by power. Sabda must therefore be embedded in an architecture that both honours its authority and subjects concrete interpretations of it to disciplined scrutiny.

That is the role of The Cohesive Tetrad, to which we turn after addressing one more obstacle, the widespread belief that even if morality needs Sabda, pure logic does not.

5. The self limitation of pure logic and the epistemic priority of Sabda

Up to this point, the pressure on naturalistic and procedural foundations has come mainly from the side of dignity and telos. Capacity, evolution, and contract could not, on their own, sustain axioms A1 to A5 without leaning on a thicker normative source. Once Sabda is named as that source, however, a further objection becomes visible. Even if morality needs something like Sabda, the objector says, logic does not. Logic is supposed to be a formal enterprise that can stand on its own feet. It may need axioms, but those axioms are simply given within the system; they do not depend on any external word about what humans are and what they are for.

In this section, I argue that this confidence in the self sufficiency of pure logic is misplaced. The point is not to undermine logic or to deny its necessity. The point is to show that even logic, when taken seriously as an activity of reasoning creatures who care about truth and coherence, depends on a prior horizon of norm and telos. That horizon is precisely the kind of thing that Sabda is meant to name.

5.1 Logic cannot justify its own axioms

Every logical system begins somewhere. It has basic laws or axioms, rules of inference, and background assumptions about meaning. Within a given system, much can be done. One can prove theorems, derive consequences, and show that certain patterns of inference are valid. What the system cannot do, on its own, is justify its own starting points without circularity.

If we ask why we should accept, for example, a principle of non contradiction, or a rule like modus ponens, several kinds of answer are available. We can say that these principles are self evident, that they are pragmatically indispensable, that they are built into our concept of assertion, or that they are vindicated by their success in organising scientific practice. None of these answers is itself a purely logical derivation. Each appeals to something beyond formal consequence relations: to intuition, to practice, to meaning, to empirical success.

The point can be put more sharply. Within a given logic L, one cannot prove that L is correct without presupposing some standard of correctness that is at least as strong as L. Attempting to prove the reliability of L using L simply chases its own tail. Switching to a different logic L' just repeats the pattern at a higher level. In this sense, logic is parasitic on extra logical

commitments about what counts as a good reason, a genuine contradiction, or a successful representation of reality.

This does not mean that anything goes. There can be better and worse arguments for adopting one logical framework rather than another. It does mean that the authority of logic as such is not self grounding. It stands in need of a wider normative horizon that says why these ways of inferring and not others are binding on creatures like us.

5.2 Logic cannot generate the epistemic "ought"

A second limitation concerns normativity. Logic describes valid transitions from premises to conclusions. If the premises are true, then the conclusions must be true as well. Yet the step from this conditional to the claim that we ought to care about such transitions is not itself a piece of logic. It is an epistemic and, in a broad sense, ethical claim.

Consider a simple inference: from "all humans are mortal" and "Socrates is human" to "Socrates is mortal." Logic tells us that the third sentence is a consequence of the first two. It does not tell us that we ought to believe the conclusion, or that we are at fault if we persist in ignoring it. To say that we should align our beliefs with valid consequence, or that it is irrational to affirm the premises and deny the conclusion, is already to invoke a standard of good and bad believing.

Debates about the normativity of logic make this point in different technical ways, but the underlying intuition is straightforward. Logical consequence has a kind of binding force for agents who see themselves as answerable to truth. That binding force is not created by the formal relation between sentences. It comes from the fact that we take ourselves to be under an obligation to respond appropriately to such relations if we care about getting things right.

Once again, this is not a reason to distrust logic. It is a reason to see that logic presupposes an epistemic "ought" that it does not itself generate. To be a reasoner at all, let alone a good one, is to stand under norms of believing, inferring, and revising that are not reducible to the shape of formal rules. The decision to treat valid consequence as binding is not a theorem. It is a commitment about what kind of creatures we are and what kind of stance toward truth we are called to adopt.

5.3 Logic is blind to telos and content

A third limitation concerns telos. Logic works at the level of form. It tells us that if premises of a certain shape are true, then conclusions of a related shape must be true as well. What it does not do is evaluate the moral or teleological quality of those contents. Valid inferences can lead from deeply unjust premises to deeply unjust conclusions without any violation of logical law.

This content blindness is both a strength and a danger. It is a strength because it allows logic to be used across domains. The same inferential patterns can apply in mathematics, physics, law, and everyday reasoning. It is a danger because it can give a false sense of moral neutrality to systems that are, in fact, saturated with value laden assumptions.

In the context of contemporary AI, this danger is particularly acute. Machine learning systems and other forms of automated reasoning are, in effect, large scale engines of pattern extraction and inference. They take inputs, apply rules or learned models, and produce outputs that can have profound effects on human lives. The logics at work in these systems, whether symbolic or statistical, do not by themselves discriminate between teloi. They can be used to optimise profit, to minimise crime, to target advertisements, or to allocate welfare benefits, depending on the objective functions they are given.

If the objectives themselves are morally distorted, the fact that the system reasons correctly from its inputs to its outputs is not reassuring. On the contrary, it can magnify injustice. A system that infers flawlessly from biased data to biased decisions is more dangerous, not less, precisely because it wraps its harms in the aura of technical correctness.

This is the practical face of logic's content blindness. Logical validity is compatible with profound moral failure. To distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable uses of logical power, we need criteria that are not delivered by logic alone. We need standards of what may and may not be pursued, of who may and may not be treated in certain ways, and of what human lives are for.

5.4 Logic under Sabda, not against it

If logic cannot justify its own axioms without circularity, cannot generate the epistemic "ought" that makes validity binding, and cannot see the telos or moral quality of the contents it links, then its authority is in a specific sense derivative. Logic is indispensable for articulating, testing, and clarifying claims, including claims about dignity and about Sabda. Yet the decision to treat logic as binding, and the determination of what ends logical power should serve, already presuppose a prior horizon of norm and purpose.

Sabda names that horizon at the deepest level. As Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, Sabda can be understood as the source that:

- calls human beings to care about truth rather than falsehood,
- commands coherence between what is said, what is believed, and what is done,
- declares that some ways of treating persons are ruled out in principle,
- orients the telos of reasoning toward justice and the protection of the vulnerable, rather than toward domination or mere efficiency.

Understood in this way, Sabda does not compete with logic on the same plane. It does not ask us to abandon valid inference or to ignore contradictions. It tells us why we must treat valid inference as binding in the first place, and how we must evaluate the uses to which inferential power is put. Sabda judges both our premises and our goals, and therefore also judges the systems of reasoning that connect them.

This has two implications for the architecture of truth governance. First, Sabda must have epistemic priority over pure logic. When there is a conflict between technically correct inferences and the demands of inherent worth, basic equality, and non instrumentalisation as disclosed by Sabda, it is the latter that must prevail. Second, Sabda must be brought into disciplined relation with logic, rather than left as a vague background. It must be articulated in

ways that can be evaluated for coherence, it must be heard in the experiences of those affected by our systems, and it must be traced in the long term moral consequences of our decisions.

The next step, therefore, is architectural. If Sabda is to ground human dignity and telos without turning into a tool of arbitrary power, it must be embedded in a structure that keeps logic, experience, spiritual orientation, moral character, and historical trace in living connection. That is the task of The Cohesive Tetrad.

6. Sabda within The Cohesive Tetrad: an architecture for dignity and telos

Once Sabda is no longer left in the shadows but named as *Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos*, a familiar worry arises. Words that claim authority can be weaponised. In the history of law, politics, and religion, appeals to a higher Word have sometimes legitimised precisely the kinds of degradation and exclusion that dignity language is meant to resist. If Sabda is to do real work in grounding human dignity and telos, it cannot simply be placed on a pedestal and insulated from critique. It needs an architecture that honours its primacy while subjecting claims made in its name to disciplined scrutiny.

That is the role of **The Cohesive Tetrad**. It is not a new metaphysical superstructure added on top of existing theories. It is a way of organising the pursuit and governance of truth so that Sabda, logic, experience, spiritual orientation, moral character, and historical trace are held together rather than drifting apart.

6.1 The six registers of The Cohesive Tetrad

In its most compact form, The Cohesive Tetrad comprises four core registers and two diagnostic dimensions.

1. **Sabda.**
   Sabda is *Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos*. It speaks not only about what is factually the case, but about what ought to be and what humans are for. Sabda confers worth, names constraints, and discloses human telos.
2. **Logic.**
   Logic is the disciplined use of inference and conceptual analysis to test coherence, draw out implications, and expose contradictions. Logic does not create normativity. It helps us see whether our claims, including claims about Sabda, hold together.
3. **Qualia.**
   Qualia is the lived experience of persons and communities under particular norms, institutions, and technologies. It is the register in which those subject to a regime can say, in effect, “this is what it feels like to live under your laws, your policies, your code.” Qualia brings into view fear, humiliation, security, trust, and cohesion as they are actually experienced.
4. **Mistika.**
   Mistika is *Mistika, the intentional-spiritual dimension of journeying toward direct encounter with the transcendent*. It concerns the direction of the heart and mind. Mistika asks whether agents and communities are genuinely oriented toward truth and accountability before a higher Word, or whether they are using moral and religious language to cloak self interest.

5. **Akhlak.**
   Akhlak is the observable configuration of moral dispositions and practices at both individual and institutional levels. It is what appears when we watch how people actually act, not only what they say they believe. Patterns of honesty or manipulation, mercy or cruelty, patience or violence, show up here.
6. **Intention-Trace Alignment.**
   Intention-Trace Alignment is *the degree of alignment between epistemic intention and epistemic-moral trace* over time. It is not enough to profess noble intentions. We must ask whether the long term trace of decisions, documents, budgets, and infrastructures matches what was promised.

Taken together, these six registers form an **epistemic ethical circuit**. Sabda provides the normative and teleological centre. Logic organises and tests articulation. Qualia and Akhlak reveal how those articulations land in lived reality. Mistika interrogates the orientation of those who speak in the name of Sabda. Intention-Trace Alignment asks, again and again, whether the overall trajectory of a person, community, or institution is converging on or drifting away from its professed commitments.

6.2 How Sabda secures the dignity axioms

Within this architecture, Sabda performs a precise set of functions for human dignity and telos.

First, Sabda grounds **inherent worth and basic equality** (A1 and A2). On the account developed here, worth is not a statistical summary of capacities, contributions, or social esteem. It is a status conferred by how Sabda speaks of human beings. Sabda addresses each human person as a bearer of worth that is not earned and cannot be lost by failure or fragility. At the same time, it does so without gradation. There are not "more" and "less" addressed humans. This is what basic equality means when taken seriously, not as a rhetorical flourish.

Second, Sabda clarifies **human telos** in a way that sustains A4. By speaking about what humans are for, Sabda allows us to interpret life stages and conditions that look unproductive from a purely functional standpoint. Infancy, disability, illness, and dependence are not zones in which dignity is suspended. They are modes of existing under the same Word, with the same telos, even if the ways in which that telos is expressed differ from those of health or strength.

Third, Sabda establishes **non negotiable constraints** (A3). It names forms of treatment that are incompatible with what humans are and what they are for, regardless of the benefits they might bring to others. Slavery, torture, systematic humiliation, and the deliberate erasure of some groups from public concern are not just maladaptive or unstable. They are betrayals of Sabda's description of persons.

Fourth, Sabda underwrites **accountability and self correction** (A5). Because Sabda is a Word that can be invoked not only by rulers but also by the ruled, it provides a standard by which institutions can be judged from within their own normative horizon. When a state, a court, or a corporation claims to honour human dignity, Sabda functions as the criterion that allows victims and witnesses to say, "you have named this Word, but your practices contradict it."

In short, Sabda does the work that capacities, evolution, and contracts could not do on their own. It confers given worth, fixes non negotiable boundaries, and orients human life toward a telos that is not exhausted by adaptive success or mutual agreement.

6.3 The other registers as checks on claims about Sabda

If this were all, The Cohesive Tetrad would still be vulnerable to the familiar charge of authoritarianism. Anyone could claim to speak for Sabda and use that claim to close down argument. The crucial feature of the Tetrad is that it **refuses to sacralise any particular human interpretation** of Sabda. Instead, it forces such interpretations into contact with the other registers.

- **Logic** asks whether a claimed reading of Sabda is coherent with the rest of what is said and done. A supposed "Sabda" that legitimises degrading treatment of some humans will clash immediately with axioms A1 to A4 and with other affirmations about worth and equality. Logical analysis does not decide whether the Word is true. It tests whether those who invoke it are consistent.
- **Qualia** brings in the voices and experiences of those under Sabda shaped norms. If a community proclaims that a legal or technological order honours human dignity, but those subject to it report fear, humiliation, or invisibility, there is a gap between profession and reality that cannot be ignored. Sabda does not float above such testimony. It is often in the cries of the afflicted that its judgment is most sharply heard.
- **Mistika** probes intention and orientation. Are leaders and institutions genuinely seeking to be answerable to a higher Word, or are they using the language of Sabda to secure their own position. This is not a mystical ornament. It is recognition that normativity and power are always entangled, and that the integrity of appeal to Sabda depends on the inner direction of those who speak it.
- **Akhlak** asks the oldest diagnostic question: what kind of character does this teaching produce. If repeated appeals to Sabda lead, in practice, to arrogance, domination, and indifference to the vulnerable, something has gone wrong. Conversely, patterns of patience, humility, courage, and mercy are not conclusive proof that an interpretation is correct, but they are not irrelevant either.
- **Intention-Trace Alignment** finally checks the long term trajectory. Institutions, like persons, can tell compelling stories about their intentions. The Tetrad demands a harder test: do the historical traces, the policies enacted, budgets allocated, technologies deployed, align with the stated commitment to human dignity under Sabda, or do they drift away from it.

Through this multi register scrutiny, The Cohesive Tetrad holds two things at once. It affirms the **primacy of Sabda** in conferring norm and telos, and it acknowledges the **fallibility of human readings** of that Sabda. The framework is designed less as a fortress for dogma than as a circuit of ongoing discernment in which Word, logic, experience, spirit, character, and history continually confront one another.

6.4 From architecture to practice: law, public policy, and AI

The language of registers and alignment can sound abstract. It is therefore important to see how the architecture of The Cohesive Tetrad might function in practice.

In **constitutional law**, a court that explicitly recognises Sabda as grounding dignity could still be tempted to interpret dignity in narrow, capacity based, or majoritarian terms. Under the Tetrad, such a court would be required to:

- articulate its reading of Sabda and dignity in precise, logically analysable form,
- listen to the lived experiences (Qualia) of those at the margins of its jurisdiction,
- examine the institutional culture (Akhlak) of the judiciary, asking whether it is one of humility and service or of self protection,
- and ask, over decades, whether landmark judgments and legal reforms, the trace of its work, actually converge on greater protection for the most vulnerable or subtly retract it.

In **public policy**, especially under resource constraints, the architecture resists the slide from cost benefit calculations to the quiet normalisation of discardable lives. It does so not by banning cost benefit analysis, but by insisting that such analysis operates under the constraints set by Sabda's declarations about who may not be sacrificed and what may not be traded away. Policies that treat some humans as expendable for aggregate gain would fail both the Sabda test and the tests of Qualia, Akhlak, and Intention-Trace Alignment.

In **artificial intelligence governance**, The Cohesive Tetrad becomes particularly salient. AI systems are paradigmatic embodiments of pure logic and data driven patterning. Without an architecture like the Tetrad, there is a real risk that AI will become the most efficient mechanism yet devised for formalising and amplifying existing injustices. Under the Tetrad, however, AI development and deployment would be subject to:

- **Sabda informed constraints** on how persons may be represented and treated,
- continuous monitoring of **Qualia**, by attending to how those most affected experience AI mediated decisions,
- scrutiny of institutional **Akhlak**, asking whether organisations deploying AI exhibit honesty, humility, and responsiveness,
- evaluation of designers' and regulators' **Mistika**, in the sense of their genuine orientation toward truth and accountability,
- and long term assessment of **Intention-Trace Alignment**, checking whether the actual social and moral trace of AI systems matches the human centric commitments proclaimed at their launch.

In each of these domains, the claim is not that Sabda replaces law, policy, or technical expertise. It is that without something like Sabda, integrated into a wider architecture of truth governance, our strongest talk of human dignity and telos floats above practices that, under pressure, will always be tempted to turn people back into instruments. The Cohesive Tetrad offers one way of preventing that drift by placing Sabda at the centre of a disciplined circuit that binds logic and data to a prior word about what humans are and what must never be done to them.

7. Implications and conclusion

The argument of this article began from a tension in our contemporary use of human dignity and human telos. On the surface, we speak as if every human being has an inherent and equal worth that no loss of capacity or social status can erase, and as if certain treatments of persons are ruled out in principle even when they are efficient or popular. In the background, however,

we often rely on naturalistic and procedural foundations that cannot sustain claims of this strength. Capacity based, evolutionary, and contractarian accounts, even when refined and combined, turn out to lean on a thicker normative source that they do not thematise. Once this dependence is made explicit, the picture of truth governance changes.

7.1 Rethinking foundations of human dignity and telos

The first implication is conceptual. If the analysis of Sections 2 to 4 is sound, then much of the current literature on dignity and telos must revise its self description. Capacity based theories do not merely elaborate the moral significance of rational agency and central capabilities. In order to include the most vulnerable without dilution, they rely on implicit teleological judgments about what humans are for. Evolutionary narratives do not simply explain the emergence of moral sensibilities. When they condemn practices that may be locally adaptive but degrading, they presuppose a norm that stands above adaptive success. Contractarian constructions do not only model fair agreement. When they insist that some beings must be treated as claim holders even if they cannot be parties, they reach beyond the space of contract.

The shared pattern is a movement from modest premises to robust conclusions that require more than capacities, evolution, or contracts can deliver on their own. Minimal dignity axioms A1 to A5 make this movement visible by asking theories to show how they handle the hardest cases without abandoning inherent worth, basic equality, non instrumentalisation, integrity across vulnerability, and accountable self correction. When the answers depend on premises that look very much like a given worth and a given telos, it is no longer honest to describe the framework as purely naturalistic or procedural.

Naming Sabda as *Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos* is one way of acknowledging this dependence. The proposal is not that every existing theory must suddenly endorse a particular scriptural tradition. It is that, insofar as we want to keep speaking in the strongest possible register about human dignity and telos, we must admit that our language presupposes something like a Word that confers worth, declares constraints, and orients human life. The choice is not between secular neutrality and religious intrusion. It is between silently borrowing from a Word we refuse to name and openly bringing that Sabda into the argument so that its content and claims can be examined.

7.2 Truth governance under Sabda for law, public policy, and AI

The second implication concerns practice. Introducing Sabda into the foundations of dignity would be irresponsible if it simply licensed new forms of dogmatism. The point of The Cohesive Tetrad is precisely to prevent this outcome by embedding Sabda in an architecture of truth governance that also includes Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention-Trace Alignment.

In law, this architecture invites courts to move beyond thin references to dignity as a residual value. Sabda gives content to inherent worth and basic equality. Logic forces coherence between constitutional principles and concrete judgments. Qualia and Akhlak expose how legal doctrines are experienced at the margins and what kind of institutional character they cultivate. Intention-Trace Alignment prevents self congratulatory narratives from ignoring the long term effects of legal decisions on those who are most vulnerable. Under such an arrangement,

dignity talk is no longer an ornamental clause. It becomes a disciplined way of holding legal orders to a Word that they publicly claim to honour.

In public policy, the Tetrad resists the tendency to slide from cost benefit reasoning to quiet sacrifice of costly lives. Sabda sets outer limits on what may be done to human beings. Logic helps clarify trade offs within those limits. Qualia, Akhlak, and Mistika reveal whether policymaking cultures are genuinely oriented toward protecting the vulnerable or toward obscuring their suffering behind aggregated indicators. Intention-Trace Alignment forces governments to track the moral as well as economic footprint of their choices over time.

In artificial intelligence, the need for such an architecture is acute. Data driven and logically structured systems can produce decisions that are both formally impeccable and substantively unjust. Sabda provides a non negotiable horizon against which the objectives and constraints of AI systems must be tested. Logic and data are then placed in service of, rather than above, that horizon. Qualia and Akhlak bring to the surface how AI mediated decisions are lived by those they classify, rank, or exclude. Mistika and Intention-Trace Alignment ask whether the long term trajectory of AI infrastructures is converging on deeper protection of human dignity or on more efficient management of expendable lives. Without such a framework, the language of human centric and dignity preserving AI risks becoming another rhetorical covering for technically sophisticated forms of instrumentalisation.

The conceptual and practical message converge at a single point. If dignity and telos are to remain more than decor, Sabda must have epistemic priority over pure logic and over the institutionalisation of logical systems in law, policy, and technology. That priority does not license the rejection of logic. It forbids the worship of logic as an ultimate authority that answers to no higher norm.

7.3 Limitations and further work

The argument presented here is intentionally programmatic. It traces the dependence of several dominant foundations for human dignity and telos on a thicker normative source, proposes Sabda as a name for that source, and sketches The Cohesive Tetrad as an architecture in which Sabda can be integrated into truth governance without collapsing into arbitrary rule. Several important questions remain open.

First, the analysis has been conducted at a high level of abstraction. Different religious and philosophical traditions understand the Word, human nature, and telos in divergent ways. A full account would need to explore how Sabda, as defined here, can be received, interpreted, and contested in plural contexts without either dissolving into a lowest common denominator or hardening into an exclusionary dogma. This requires sustained work in comparative theology, political philosophy, and legal theory.

Second, the article has not offered a detailed methodology for implementing The Cohesive Tetrad in specific institutional settings. Translating the six registers into concrete procedures, indicators, and review mechanisms in courts, ministries, regulatory bodies, and AI labs is a task for further research. Such work will need to respect the differences between domains while maintaining the core insight that Sabda, logic, experience, spiritual orientation, character, and historical trace must be held together.

Third, there is a need for critical engagement with those who reject the very idea of a norm and telos giving Word. Some may argue that dignity talk should be weakened rather than supported by Sabda, that the cost of maintaining the strongest claims is too high. Others may try to preserve strong dignity language within a reconstructed naturalism. These counter positions are not only predictable but necessary. They will help clarify whether the dependence diagnosed in this article is as deep as it appears.

Despite these limitations, the main conclusion can be stated simply. If we intend to keep saying that every human being has an inherent and equal worth, that some treatments of persons are absolutely excluded, and that our institutions must be judged by how they protect the most vulnerable across time, then we cannot remain within the comfort of purely naturalistic and procedural foundations. We must acknowledge the presence of a Word that speaks about what humans are and what they are for, and we must build structures that bind our reasoning, our technologies, and our laws to that Word.

The Cohesive Tetrad is one proposal for such a structure. It does not resolve all disagreements about Sabda, dignity, or telos. It does, however, insist that these disagreements be conducted in the open, under conditions where claims about human worth are tested not only by internal coherence, but also by their capacity to protect real human beings from being turned back into expendable instruments under the smooth surface of logic and data.

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